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RAMESWARAM

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(THE SACRED ISLAND)

MAJOR H. A. NEWELL

Indian Army

An Illustrated Guide, including the Story of the Ramayana

(*FIRST EDITION*)

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BY

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INTRODUCTION.

DESPITE the fame of Rameswaram and its wonderful temple, its classical associations and its odour of sanctity, very few of the numerous visitors who come to India have hitherto ventured so far out of the unbeaten track. They have contented themselves with more accessible, if less celebrated, shrines. Nor can they be accused of lack of enterprise. It required a very dauntless spirit to venture along the narrow pier at Mandapam, its planks creaking and groaning beneath the barefooted crowd intent upon their souls' salvation. Sadhus, lepers, the halt, the maimed and the blind, jostled and squeezed in among the motley throng. All took their chance together with a splendid disregard of consequences. Pushing, elbowing and perspiring, the press of devotees finally forced their way into a steamer which sunk even lower in the water beneath the increasing weight of piety.

Two-thirds of the passage across the Pamban Channel the launch paused, as though utterly exhausted and unable to breast another wave. Passengers scrambled, or were lowered over the side into primitive barges. In these the remainder of the voyage was accomplished under conditions which may appeal to those particularly desirous of practising austerities for their souls' sake but to none else.

Now, however, the South of India Railway has changed all this. Since the building of the splendid new bridge that links Rameswaram once more with the mainland, the least valorous may visit the sacred island in ease and safety.

The great temple repays a visit. I hope that this little guide book will help to still further enhance its charms in the eyes of travellers from the West by rendering them more intelligible. My reason for appending a brief synopsis of the Ramayana is that, at least, a bowing acquaintance with the famous Indian epic is necessary if the island and its mighty shrine are to be understood and appreciated.

H. A. NEWELL,
Major, Indian Army.

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RAMESWARAM.

FAMOUS by reason of its association with that best beloved and greatest of Indian epics, the Ramayana, the sacred island of Rameswaram has, for countless centuries, been a favourite place of pilgrimage with Hindus of all ages, castes and sects. Its remote situation, the difficulties of the journey, and perils of the way, have but served to enhance its attractions in the eyes of the devout. From time immemorial they have continued to crowd thither with their oblations of Ganges water. Having recited their prayers, performed their ablutions and made their offerings in the great Ramanathaswamy Temple, they piously proceed to the holy bathing *ghat* at Dhanushkhodi some twelve miles distant.

At the exact junction of the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea, where the waters meet, but never mingle, pilgrims enter the ocean. Eternally wind churned, at this particular point, the foaming waves are held to possess miraculous virtues. It was here that Rama bathed after his conquest of Ceylon to cleanse himself from the sin of having slain Ravana, the ten-headed demon. Ravana had stolen Rama's beautiful wife, Sita, and had carried her off captive to his kingdom of Lanka (Ceylon), hence the invasion of his country by the monkey host and his death at the hands of the injured husband.

The sacred island of Rameswaram lies south-east of the great Indian peninsula from which it is separated by the Pamban Channel. According to ancient tradition it was once joined to the mainland by the causeway, or rocky formation, known as Adam's Bridge. Records treasured in the celebrated Ramanathaswamy Temple describe how a violent gale caused a breach in this isthmus, as long ago as 1480. Subsequent storms enlarged the opening and rendered it permanent. Although a sea passage was formed, it was not navigable, being partially blocked by two parallel ridges of rock about 140 feet apart. In 1828 blasting operations were undertaken, with a view to widening and deepening the channel. Much work has been done since then with the result that the passage has been rendered navigable by quite large ships.

Excepting for its famous temple, and the money brought thither as pious offerings by pilgrims, the island can boast but little wealth of any kind. The greater portion of it consists of hot, wind-swept desert. Were it not for its close association with the hero of the Ramayana there is no doubt but that it would have shared the fate of thousands of similar islands and remained for ever "the world forgetting, by the world forgot". As it is, the celebrated epic has converted it into a spot of such sanctity that, throughout the ages, millions have braved death by fire, water, pestilence, famine and the sword in the hope of treading its sacred

soil. In such high veneration is it held that no plough is permitted to be used on the land, only a hoe, and no blood of bird or beast may be shed for fear of defilement.

THE SETHUPATHY.

RAMESWARAM forms part of the Ramnad Zamindary, and is by far the most important of the eleven islands belonging to that ancient estate. It is ruled over by the Sethupathy, or Lord of the Causeway, as the Raja is styled. He owes his curious title to the tradition that a causeway once actually existed between Rameswaram and the mainland. Among Hindus the belief prevails that the first Sethupathy was appointed by Rama himself to guard the causeway, and protect pilgrims on their way to the sacred island,

The Sethupathy lays claim to very ancient lineage He traces his descent back through pre-historic times to. Guha, King of Nishidas, a forest domain immortalised in the Ramayana. It was to his friend King Guha that Rama despatched the trusty messenger Hanuman, the monkey god, with news of his victory over Ravana and subsequent safe return from Ceylon.

The pilgrimage to Rameswaram faithfully accomplished, the dearest desire of the homebound devotees is to catch a glimpse of the Sethupathy as they pass through Ramnad. Cleansed of their sins in the waters at Dhanushkodi, they feel that it needs but a sight of the

descendant of the first Lord of the Causeway appointed by the divine Rama to complete their salvation.

ADAM'S BRIDGE.

ART having stepped in where nature failed. and, by means of blasting, drilling and dredging, constructed the navigable sea passage known as Pamban Channel, all that remains of Adam's Bridge is the portion stretching between Rameswaram and the Island of Manaar off the coast of Ceylon. Composed of sand, drift and rock, this curious isthmus is some thirty miles long and about a mile and a quarter wide.

The name Adam's Bridge is derived from a Mohammadan source. It was given to the isthmus by early Arab traders, among whom the belief prevailed that Adam took refuge in Ceylon after his banishment from Paradise. According to their legend the father of mankind placed Eve in Mecca, and then set out to wander the world in search of a dwelling-place. Having decided to make his home in Ceylon he returned to India by way of the rocky ridge that now bears his name. He journeyed thence to Mecca, fetched Eve, and thus made their way back by the self-same route.

RAMA'S BRIDGE.

ACCORDING to the account given in the Ramayana the breakwater stretching between India and Ceylon is not a natural, but an artificial,

formation. Orthodox Hindus piously believe the description of how it was built for Rama by the army of semi-divine monkeys headed by their king Sugriva. The great work was directed by Nala, son of the architect of the gods, ably assisted by the indefatigable Hanuman.

How curiously history repeats itself is illustrated by the fact that the new railway bridge which links Rameswaram to India, after a separation of nearly five centuries, follows the same course as the famous causeway built by the monkeys in the far-off Silver Age. Then, as now, the link commenced at Mandapam, and stretched across to a point near the celebrated bathing *ghat* at Dhanushkhodi.

THE TEMPLE OF RAMANATHASWAMY.

SITUATED on slightly rising ground in the northern part of the island, the temple of Ramanathaswamy has been described as peculiarly illustrative of the best and worst in Dravidian architecture, a style which may be said practically to confine itself to the Madras Presidency. Writing of the famous shrine, an oft-quoted authority expresses the opinion that no other exhibits the same amount of patient industry, and that in none has the labour been so completely thrown away for want of a design appropriate to its display. This may be a correct verdict from an expert's point of view. It is certainly not the impression received by the ordinary visitor, who approaches the sanctuary

unbiassed by pre-conceived architectural notions of how an Indian temple should be built.

Nothing in the building is so wonderful as the corridors, which rightly rank as the most celebrated feature. It is impossible to exaggerate the imposing effect made by a succession of many-pillared galleries each extending nearly 700 feet, while imagination reels at the mere thought of the labour involved by highly ornate corridors covering more than 4000 feet in length.

Travellers familiar with the marvels of ancient Egyptian architecture exclaim at the similarity which exists between the Ramanathaswamy Temple and the world-famous temple of Remeses at Thebes. Of this I am not in a position to judge, never having been to Thebes, but Egyptian influence is distinctly recognisable in certain of the vividly coloured pictures with which the stone ceilings are decorated. This is the more strange as it is highly improbable that either priest or painter of modern times has sought inspiration from alien models in the land of the Nile. Unswerving fidelity to tradition and strict observance of old customs amount to a cult of vital import among Brahmins, hence it may be taken for granted that the pictures in the sanctuary to-day are facsimiles of those which embellished it at an early date.

ENTRANCE.

THE temple enclosure is guarded by a high wall extending 865 feet from east to west, and 675 feet from north to south. It is best entered

by way of the west gopuram, situated about a mile from the railway station. Fronting the principal entrance on the opposite side of the road, is a tall lamp-post characterised by five branching lights. This is inscribed: "In commemoration of the Coronation of King George V Emperor of India, 12th December 1911." The west gopuram attains a height of 75 feet, and is constructed entirely of granite. It is trapezoid in form and of very massive workmanship. Towards the summit the severity of outline is relieved by carved figures representing various deities and heroes connected with the Ramayana. Guarding the sombre gateway are shrines to Gannapathi and Subramania, the elder and younger sons of Siva. Inside the portico the eye is attracted by a deeply cut inscription on some worn stone steps, their surface polished by the bare feet of countless worshippers. It is disappointing to learn that the writing possesses no mysterious significance either religious or historical, being merely the names of pilgrims who have paid six rupees for the privilege of thus recording their visit to the temple.

Both the west gopuram and high outer wall are ascribed to the generous piety of a merchant and his wife, from Negore, who caused them to be built in 1434.

THE GREAT WEST CORRIDOR.

THE rather gloomy portal gives access to by far the finest corridor in the building. This is flanked by double rows of granite pillars,

each carved out of a single block of stone quarried some forty miles away. Those in the front line are painted in stripes of red and yellow. The manner in which light is admitted to this and other parts of the sanctuary is unique in its way and calls for special attention. There is no question but that the building gains much from the curious and skilful play of light and shadow.

Used as a bazaar the forepart of the colonnade is devoted to small booths, the owners of which ply a brisk trade at times of special festival. To right are ranged vendors of many kinds of sea-shell, the conch variety predominating. On the left side artists are busily engaged painting on glass in the most brilliant colours picked out with gold. As a matter of course the subjects chosen are from the Ramayana and generally depicts Rama, his beloved wife Sita, his admirable brother Lakshmana, and Hanuman, the ever-popular monkey-god. When finished the quaint little pictures in their bright gilt frames look rather like cheap Russian ikons. Sacred figures in coloured plaster, of different deities, are attractively set forth near covered baskets made from dyed grass neatly and strongly plaited. The shells, however, are what command the most ready sale. No pilgrim cares to leave until he has procured a number for himself and those less fortunate relatives and friends who eagerly await his return home. He could bring them no more appropriate souvenir of his sojourn at Rameswaram, the conch shell being one of the emblems peculiar to Vishnu.

AN ANOMALY.

IN view of the very distinct line which in South India divides the followers of Vishnu the Pre server from those of Siva the Destroyer, it would seen matter for surprise that, unlike similar great shrines, the temple of Ramnathaswamy is dedicated to the worship of both divinities impartially. This apparent anomaly is accounted for when it is remembered that Rama was one of the ten incarnations of Vishnu. According to the firm belief of many million Hindus, the divine Vishnu, in the human form of Rama, first set up Siva's emblem at Rameswaram, and then proceeded to build the temple. This explains how the sacred island comes to rank third in order of merit among the holy places of Hinduism and how, far away though it is and difficult of access to many, the only shrines to attract a larger number of pilgrims are those of Benares and Puri.

STATUES.

THE great corridor running from the west gopuram is comparatively modern. It was commenced in 1739 by Muthukumara Vizia Ragunatha Sethupathy, who also built the third prakaram or enclosure. The work begun by this Raja was completed by his successor, Muthramalinga Sethupathy, in 1769. Ranged on pedestals down either side of the central avenue of pillars, in the west gallery are coloured statues representing the second named sovereign, two of his principal ministers and certain favoured members of his

family. Other carved figures portray different Hindu deities. Conspicuous, too, are spirited presentments of those *kalis* or dragons always met with in large South of India temples.

The east end of the corridor is cut off by a massive door leading into the second prakaram to which none but high caste Hindus may enter. Beyond again is the first prakaram, and, finally, the innermost sanctum containing the shrines of the god and goddess as well as various small chapels and other chambers.

Guarding the forbidden portal are the figures of elephants surmounted by the usual *darwara palakas* or gate-keepers. The door itself is kept jealously locked, and is of teak studded with huge nails set into large flowers of wrought iron.

TIRTHAMS.

MIDWAY in its course the long west corridor is crossed by a transverse gallery, the northern extremity of which abuts on an open stone flagged quadrangle. This is prohibited ground to any but Hindus. Nevertheless to archæologists it is probably the most interesting spot in Rameswaram for it contains a small temple of undoubted antiquity. Some authorities go so far as to claim that this hidden sanctuary is actually older than the world-famous rock-cut shrines at Mahabalipuram (Seven Pagodas), the inscription on which proves them to date from the 5th century.

The courtyard also contains five wells, four of which are square shaped and one round, and a second temple. The latter faces the east and is entered through a many-pillared *mantapam* or hall, while the western portion is crowned by a *gopuram*. Much of the carving lavished on the hard limestone exterior has been obliterated by centuries of exposure to the elements, accelerated by the damaging action of sea-air.

Altogether there are twenty sacred wells, and three *tirthams*, or bathing tanks, attached to the great temple. Each is distinguished by a special title. Their waters are held to possess many and various merits. One, for example, assures Mukthi or Heaven to those who perform their ablutions therein, a second frees from sin, a third bestows material benefits, a fourth absolves from the dread consequences of a curse, and so on. The devout pilgrim takes care to derive all the good possible by laving himself in the purifying liquid of each in turn ere he quits the holy precincts.

SOUTH CHOKKATAN.

FOLLOWING the transverse gallery southwards a large, square tank is passed on the right. This goes by the name of Madhara Tirtham. The sloping sides are faced with granite cut into steps. Twenty-two of these rather broken stairs lead down to the water's edge. Beyond again is a long chokkatan or gallery running west and east in a line parallel with the

entrance corridor. At its western extremity, six steps lead up to a square porch of massive design supported by carved figures. Within is a chapel-like recess once used as a shrine but now converted into a dispensary.

The chokkatan is flanked by rows of stately pillars. Those in front are painted red and yellow at the base. Adorning the column heads are the projecting forms of *yalis* or dragons, their mouths wide open to display a superfluity of tongues. A couple of the most formidable are depicted in the act of gulping down two women whom they have apparently swallowed feet first.

The ceiling is composed of large granite slabs decorated with brilliantly-coloured pictures arranged in circles. These are the work of the special staff of temple artists who use a particular kind of powder mixed with gum and water for the purpose. The result is not permanent, and the designs require constant touching up.

THE DEVAKOTTA CHETTIES.

SOME three hundred feet down the Chokkatan is crossed by a short transverse gallery, the northern end of which leads into the second prakaram. The other extremity runs out to the great unfinished south gate. Between the high exterior wall, of which the gateway forms part, and the third prakaram, stretches a wide sandy tract open to the sky. This place is littered with huge blocks of granite, while the sound

of chisel and hammer tell a tale of work in progress, and break the somewhat oppressive hush of the vast sanctuary.

Masons are busily engaged modelling and beautifying pillars, door jambs and roof slabs wherewith to restore the first and second prakarams encircling that sanctum sanctorum, the shrine of Ramanathaswamy. For this pious purpose no less than thirty lakhs of rupees have been donated by the Chetty community of Devakotta.

The term Chetty signifies trader. From the time of Brahmin ascendancy all Hindus have been rigidly divided into castes and classed accordingly. Each caste has its special name, distinguishing marks, privileges, prejudices and occupations. There is no deviating from these. The rules governing caste are as immutable as were ever the laws that held sway among the Medes and Persians of old.

The Nattukottai Chetties belong to the town of Devakotta, where they form an important trading community. Possessed of unusual business ability they have always been notorious for their love of money and their penurious habits. No matter how rich they may be, they prefer to live in the poorest and meanest manner, denying themselves and their families all but the bare necessities of existence. Great as is their talent for finance they are merciless towards those not similarly gifted. Woe indeed to the spendthrift who gets into

their hands. Nevertheless, it is this seemingly miserly and uxorious community who have lavished untold wealth upon restoring the great and famous temples of South India.

PARVATHA VARADAM AMMAN.

FROM the east gallery the first transverse leads eastwards through the two inner prakarams to the shrine of the goddess Parvatha Varadam Amman. Flanking the approach are eight life-sized statues painted in brilliant colours. The two principal figures represent that gallant and successful warrior, Tirumula Sethupathy, and his son, Ragunatha Tirumula Sethupathy. These two Lords of the Causeway built the second prakaram. The work was begun in 1647 and finished in 1672.

Every Friday night witnesses a quaint rite. The statues of the two Rajas are hung with heavy garlands of white flowers, and are further honoured with offerings of betel and nut. This memorial service is never omitted. It forms part of the weekly ceremony attendant upon carrying the goddess past the statues on her way to the *palliarai* or sleeping apartment.

Non-Hindus are only allowed a few steps along the transverse leading to the hidden mysteries of the sanctuary. A partly-open door allows a tantalizing glimpse across the forbidden enclosures to where a tall, golden flagstaff marks the entrance to the shrine. Small

lamps twinkle star-like in the dim religious light, while the ear strains to catch the muffled beating of distant drum, and the soft music of women's voices singing in the dark. Before the altar of the flower-wreathed goddess nautch girls bend, circle and sway in the mystic measure of the Vedic dance.

DASIES.

"All life is the play of the power that stirs
In the dance of my wanton worshippers."
—SIR A. LYALL.

MOST large temples in South India include a number of dancing-girls on their staff. These are known by the name of *dasies*, and play an important part in processions and on other festival occasions. As a general rule, the profession of *dasie* is hereditary, being handed down from mother to daughter through countless generations. The exception is in the case of parents who dedicate a particularly pretty little girl to the service of the gods, either as fulfilment of a vow, or in the hope of obtaining some much-desired reward. The dances practised are of great antiquity. Characterised by a certain voluptuous solemnity they are strangely suggestive of that curious blending of mysticism and sensuality so essentially Hindu.

The *dasies* will display their skill for the benefit of strangers on payment of a stipulated sum.

RAMANATHASWAMY.

THE innermost shrine of Ramanathaswamy, or Visuvanathaswamy, as the god is variously called, lies at the end of the transverse a little beyond and parallel with that leading to the temple of his consort. The approach is by way of an elaborately carved portal. Further on, a tall, gold flagstaff may be seen glittering through a polished archway of bell-metal resplendent with a thousand tiny lamps. The sanctum sanctorum is ascribed to Kandy Raja. In it the great god Siva is represented by his emblem, above which the divine cobra stretches his five hoods, umbrella-fashion. To right of the lingam stands Rama, facing his beloved wife Sita. Around are clustered the figures of Lakshmana, model of all that a younger brother should be, Vibhishana, the virtuous King of Ceylon, Sugriva, King of the Monkeys, and other familiar heroes of the Ramayana. Approaching the group lingam in hand is Hanuman, the ever popular monkey deva.

This typical scene illustrates at a glance the why and wherefore of the temple, and the reason for the island ranking third in order of sanctity among the seven holy places of Hinduism.

THE EMBLEM.

NAMED after Rama and Eswara—another title for Siva—Rameswaram signifies "the place where Rama worshipped Siva."

According to prevalent belief Rama's first act on his return from conquering Ceylon, where he had slain Ravana, was to cleanse himself from the sin of having shed human blood by bathing in the all-purifying waters at Dhanushkhodi. This accomplished, he desired to set up Siva's emblem in the island on the spot where the vast Ramanathaswamy Temple now stands. An auspicious date was decided upon for the consecration ceremony. Hanuman was hastily despatched to the Khasi (Benares) for the necessary lingam. The doughty ape did not return and the appointed day drew near. Fearing that longer delay would be fatal to his plans, Rama directed Sita to construct an emblem out of sand. This was done, and the lingam made by the princess was duly set up, consecrated and worshipped.

Great was Hanuman's disappointment on returning from his long journey to find Sita's emblem already installed. Smarting with mortification he first sprung up to his full height, then flung himself down on the ground at Rama's feet. So violent was his fall that when he raised his face it was bathed in blood. Rama was much moved at sight of his faithful messenger's sorrow. Accordingly he commanded Hanuman's lingam to be set up and consecrated. He further ordered that it should be worshipped first, and the one made by Sita second. This custom is faithfully observed to this day.

A PIOUS USAGE.

IT is usual with pilgrims from the north to bring down water from the Ganges wherewith to make the prescribed oblation. This is done

by pouring the sacred liquid eight times daily over the emblems. The *lotahs*, or brass vessels, in which the water has made the long pilgrimage, are eagerly sought after by European visitors, by whom they are considered the most appropriate souvenir possible of a visit to Rameswaram.

HANUMAN'S SHRINE.

BEYOND, and to right of the outermost entrance in the great east wall, is a small, dark shrine to Hanuman, dimly illumined by two ghee-fed lights. The monkey-god is depicted as of gigantic stature. He is coloured brilliant vermilion to commemorate the blood he shed on falling face downwards before Rama after returning from Benares with the belated lingam. The glittering eyes of the scarlet-hued deva, his nose, mouth and the triple Vaishnuvite marks on his forehead, are of burnished gold, and gleam through the darkness with curious and startling effect.

EAST ENTRANCE.

A WIDE hall or *mantapam* distinguishes the east entrance. The many supporting pillars are elaborately carved, but the workmanship and general effect are marred by white-wash, while the ornate column heads are gaudily coloured in such a manner as to suggest papier mache. The paintings on the stone ceiling are subdued and harmonious tones of green, blue and crimson, their drawing and design being distinctly Egyptian.

ANCIENT AND MODERN.

TO right and left of the inner east entrance are small shrines to Gannapathi, the elephant-god. and Subramania, the deva who rides on a peacock. These interesting side chapels are of undoubted antiquity. Surmounting each is a small gopuram minutely and beautifully carved. So far as fineness of workmanship and finish are concerned there is nothing else to be compared with them in the temple.

Set well back towards the interior of the edifice is the tall East Gopuram, the brightly coloured figures on which are a modern addition placed there within the last thirty years. A row of nine urn-shaped ornaments, painted in imitation of terra-cotta, finish the sharply arched summit. In its original form the gopuram was erected by Dalavoy Sathupathy (1635-1646). The same prince built the Sabathy shrine situated in the north-eastern corner of the third prakaram. It is approached by nine steps and contains a figure of Natha Raja, otherwise Siva in his popular dancing form.

NORTH GOPURAM.

THE long gallery forming the north side of the third prakaram is by far the plainest portion of the temple. The few paintings on the ceiling depict episodes and adventures connected with Hanuman, the monkey-god. Midway the corridor is cut by a short transverse passage, the northern end of which leads out to a large unfinished gateway. The massive

foundations were abandoned after they had obtained a height of 30 feet above ground. Four tall jambs or door posts rise grom the centre of the pile, marks of exclamation at so much wasted labour. By climbing to the top of the abortive gopuram it is possible to gain a very fair idea of the plan on which edifices of the kind are constructed. The lower portion consists of a block of very massive masonry longer in front and shorter at the sides. From this solid basis the pyramidal superstructure rises in the form of two playing cards made to rest slantways against one another by meeting at the top, the sides strengthened by walls which taper up to a V. Down below the solid base is pierced by a hall. This branches out midway into cells which can either be used as shrines or shops.

WEALTH.

THE Temple of Ramanathaswamy is considered one of the wealthiest and most prosperous in India. It derives an annual revenue of Rs. 40,000 from fifty-seven villages donated at various times by Rajas of the Ramnad Zamindary. In addition large sums have been lavished on it by the Devakottoi Chetties, and offerings are constantly pouring in from the daily stream of pilgrims. The jewels and gold plates are valued at several lakhs of rupees.

The finances of the sanctuary are in the hands of an official distinguished by the title of Pundarem. This office of financial secretary is hereditary, or, rather, it is

confined to the members of one family belonging to the Sudra caste. The post has its pains as well as its privileges, the Pundarem being required to take the oath of celibacy. In order no doubt to compensate him for this drawback, he is allowed the privilege of naming his successor.

AGE.

THIS is very difficult to determine. According to tradition Rama himself set up the two lingams and started to build a temple for them. That a shrine has occupied the site from the very earliest days of Hindusm is an indisputable fact, but whether any portion of the original building still remains is quite another matter. A rock-cut inscription near Conjeeveram tells of a raid made on the shrine by the Singhalese in the 9th century A. D. It speaks of the invaders as "very wicked men", who broke down the temple door at "holy Rameswaram" and despoiled the sanctuary of its treasures. As it now stands the temple owes most of its magnificence to the Sethupathy. For a period extending over three hundred years the Lords of the Causeway lavished their wealth on enlarging and beautifying the celebrated shrine, and in building *choultries* or rest-houses for the accommodation of pilgrims. In the latter part of the 18th century the work was abruptly brought to a standstill by the troublous nature of the times, and the vast changes which were taking place all over India, changes so momentous as to even re-act on the

destinies of far-away Ramanathaswamy. But for these the temple would doubtless have grown to mammoth proportions by now, in evidence of which stand the great unfinished gateways of the fourth prakaram.

FESTIVALS.

THE shrine celebrates three great festivals annually. The first is in February and lasts for ten days. The second is known as the Rama Lingam Uthsavam, and takes place in June. The third is the Marriage Festival, and is held in July. On these occasions a horse, two camels and two elephants take part in the procession. The temple records state that prior to the breach in the causeway made by the gale in 1480, cutting Rameswaram off from the mainland, the Swamy was on these three great occasions borne in state across Rama's Bridge to the Tiruppullani Temple, some six miles from the present capital of the Zamindary.

CAIN AND ABEL.

THE retiring room at Rameswaram Railway Station faces a palm grove and a native village. Beyond again rise the tall, white minarets of what appears to be a Muhammadan mosque. Passing to the rear of this unexpected building an open door gives access to the interior which presents a very astonishing sight. The floor space is completely filled by two immensely long narrow graves, each 40 feet in length. One is the facsimile of the other. Both are characterised by smooth, rounded tombstones that look exactly lke recum-

bent pillars cut in half. At the head of each appears an upright tablet of moderate dimensions, slightly smaller monuments marking the feet. These extraordinary graves bear no inscriptions. In vain the eye seeks some answer to the riddle. The white-washed walls remain unresponsive, and the faint, ghostly light emitted by the lamp swinging from the ceiling but serves to enhance the mystery. A white-clad mullah appears at the doorway. Obediently the visitor removes his shoes and draws nearer to the strangest tombs he ever saw in his life—the tombs of Cain and Abel.

The local legand runs that, after slaying Abel, Cain was commanded to carry his brother's corpse all round the earth, until such time as Heaven should vouchsafe him a sign that his penance was ended. Foot-sore, sick with remorse, and worn out with the weight of his terrible burden, Cain at last reached Rameswaram. Lying down to rest in the shade of a palm tree he was roused by the noise of two crows fighting. The conflict ended by one killing the other, whereupon Cain knew that the promised sign had been given him. Accordingly he proceeded to dig a grave wherein he buried Abel on the spot where the crow had fallen. Then he too died, and was laid beside his brother.

DHANUSHKODI.

THE pilgrimage to Rameswaram ends at Dhanushkhodi, a narrow strip of wind-swept sand at the south-eastern extremity of the island,

about eleven miles from the great temple. Until the advent of the railway the intervening tract of hot desert had to be tramped on foot, unless the devotee happened to be a man of means, in which case he made the arduous journey on one of the hardy island ponies specially bred for pilgrim traffic. Now even the most penitent takes advantage of the train.

The line runs through scattered groves of cocoanut palm, and past occasional huts fashioned from bamboo thatched with palm leaves. There are no evidences of agriculture to be seen, although from the excessive greenness of such vegetation as flourishes of its own accord in the wilderness it is clear that water must exist somewhere near the surface. The soil is completely hidden from view by sand. This is not a matter for surprise, considering that for eleven months of the year the island is the prey of every wind that blows.

Thorn bushes, known in Tamil by the name of *odai*, are present in great abundance : so is the babul, a stunted tree with a very crooked trunk. Constant sea breezes have blown the babuls into curious, flat shapes, sugges-tive of Chinese umbrellas. A few tamarinds are also to be found.

The sacred bathing-ghat at Dhanushkodi lies at the point where the waters of the Bay of Bengal meet those of the Arabian Sea. Rama is supposed to have marked the spot with an arrow from his wonderful bow. Here pilgrims bathe and scatter the ashes of their dead.

TEVO SHADOWS.

ACCORDING to traditions, it was noticed that, after slaying Ravana, the ten-headed demon king of Ceylon, Rama cast two shadows, a peculiarity only remarked in sinners guilty of some dread offence. On setting foot upon the island of Gundamanthrum—the original name for Rameswaram—the second shadow disappeared, whereupon the attendant Brahmins assured Rama he was treading upon sacred ground, and that his sins were in consequence forgiven. To cleanse himself entirely from the guilt of bloodshed Rama bathed at Dhanushkhodi, after which he instructed Sita how to make a lingam out of the sand on the sea shore. The work accomplished, he named the emblem Ramanathaswamy, and set it up on the spot where the great temple now stands.

NOAH'S ARK.

A CURIOUS stone structure standing low down on the beach at Dhanushkhodi is known as Noah's Ark. The tale runs that when the universal flood subsided Noah found no further use for the Ark : accordingly it drifted about on the face of the waters until the waves washed it up to its present moorings.

PAMBAM.

SITUATED to west of the island, Pamban is the chief sea-port. It gives its name to the channel through Adam's Bridge which unites the Gulf of Manaar and Palk Straits.

The inhabitants are principally seafaring men and work as pilots, divers and so on. It was once the head-quarters of an important pearl fishery, and also served as a place of refuge for the Sethupathys on those not infrequent occasions when the Lords of the Causeway found it expedient to put the sea between them and the rest of their dominions.

In the latter days of the East Indian Company, Pamban boasted a garrison consisting of a European officer and a hundred sappers and miners. Later still it was used as a convict station, a hundred and fifty prisoners being kept there under military surveillance. A pathetic relic of those days survives in the form of a peculiar granite monument conspicuously situated near the landing stage. It immediately attracts notice and excites a vague feeling of curiosity. The inscription reads :—

In memory of
Charles Binning Gibb Esq., Lieutenant, 31st Light Infantry,
who was drowned at Palamcottah,
on the 9th of February 1845.
Aged 24 years.

Erected by Lieutenant Colin Gibb, 31st.
Pamban, 12th August.

THE TRAGEDY OF THE PAVED WAY.

A ONCE splendid road runs between Pamban and the holy city of Rameswaram. Eight miles in length, it is paved with large stone flags,

while *chattarams*, or rest-houses, for the convenience of pilgrims, are built at intervals of a mile along the route. Since the advent of the railway the road has been somewhat abandoned, with the result that it has been allowed to fall into disrepair. The tale of its building is a tragic one.

In 1711 Vizia Ragunada Sethupathy became Lord of the Causeway. Never had prince taken the mission entrusted to him by Rama more seriously. He was entirely devoted to the welfare of the pilgrims whose sworn protector he was. Despite the distance that separated his Capital from Rameswaram he made it a point never to omit attending evening devotion in the great Ramanathaswamy Temple. There was no paved way in those days—only a long road heavy with sand. By means of constant relays of horses the Sethupathy managed to cover the necessary thirty-seven miles before sunset. The better to safeguard the pilgrims, this pious prince appointed his son-in-law, the husband of his two daughters by his senior wife, Governor of Pamban. At the same time he strictly enjoined his son-in-law to lend every possible assistance to pilgrims in their passage across the Channel and afterwards on their long, tedious march over the sand to Dhanushkhodi.

The new Governor was not a whit behind his father-in-law in religious zeal, but he laboured under the disadvantage of being poor. It grieved him sorely to see the plight to which many of the pilgrims were

reduced by their fatiguing journey to the shrine and bathing ghat. In an hour, when his lucky star was on the wane, he devised the plan of levying a small poll-tax on all devotees passing through Pamban. With the money thus derived he set about the task of paving the weary eight miles of burning, shifting sand with parallel rows of hard granite. In so doing he rendered an inestimable service to pilgrims, but one that was destined to cost him dear. No sooner did the Sethupathy learn of the unauthorised levying of the tax than he ordered his son-in-law to be executed. In vain did the Sethupathy's two daughters plead for their husband's life. The royal sentence was carried out with a promptitude deserving of a better cause. Their husband dead, the widowed princesses mounted his funeral pyre and were burnt with his corpse. The twin choultries of Akkal and Changatchiniadam are built above their ashes beside the paved road their husband built.

HISTORY.

THE Sethupathies of Ramnad trace their descent back through history to the misty times of tradition, and beyond again to the far-off legendary days of the Tretayuga or Silver Age. In that hallowed long ago of Indian epic, Rama consecrated the lingams at holy Rameswaram and sanctified the ghat at Dhanushkhodi by bathing there. To the end that succeeding generations might enjoy the benefits to be derived from visiting these hallowed spots, Rama ap-

pointed a Sethupathy to guard the causeway built by the monkey host. He further laid on the Sethupathy and his descendants the solemn obligation of protecting all who should bend their steps towards Rameswaram. At the same time he conferred on the Lord of the Causeway a weapon by the name of Valatadi.

According to ancient records at Tiruppullam, an old temple some six miles from the present Capital of the Zamindary, the Sethupathy was enjoined by Rama to build a city near the entrance to the sethu or causeway. This he did, and called it Mugavainagaram or Entrance Town. In course of time the name changed to that of Ramnad.

INVASIONS.

HOW faithfully the long line of Sethupathis have discharged the trust reposed in them by Rama, some three thousand years ago, is testified to by the numbers of pilgrims who have visited the island from the earliest times down to the present day. As a matter of course the temple has suffered vicissitudes of fortune. Both Singhalese and Muhammadans have broken down its doors, and robbed it of its treasures. No sooner, however, did the wave of invasion recede than pious Hindus hastened forward to restore the shrine and replenish its empty coffers. At no time has it suffered the least dimunition of prestige.

In 1173 the island was actually taken by Parakrama Babu, King of Ceylon, and held by him for several years.

An inscription at Dambala, Ceylon, mentions a temple named Nissankeswara as having been erected by that monarch on Rama's Isle.

FAMOUS PILGRIMS.

PRIOR to the Christian era, and for several centuries after, the Sethupathis appear to have been subject to the Pandyans, as long as that power was paramount in South India. Sundara Pandya, "of great and matchless fame", is mentioned as having founded and endowed various shrines during the course of his pilgrimage to Rameswaram. Arjuna, one of the heroes of the Mahabharata, is also believed to have bent his steps in the same direction.

MARAVARS.

THE Sethupathis belong to the Maravar or warrior caste, originally believed to have emigrated from Ceylon to Rameswaram when they were appointed custodians of the great temple by Rama himself. They were at first subject to the Pandyans. As soon as they became sufficiently numerous, they asserted their independence by throwing off the alien yoke and refusing to acknowledge any supremacy other than that of their own princes, the Lords of the Causeway. For eleven generations the Sethupathis remained paramount. During this time they actually managed to turn the tables on their old masters, the Pandyans, whom they reduced to the position of tributaries.

Many of the customs prevalent among the Maravars are very peculiar and differ essentially from those of ordinary Hindus. Siva-worship is the acknowledged religion, but local deities are widely honoured with libations, and offerings of flesh, fruit and flowers. Excepting in the case of Sumbunattus—the highest of the seven sub-divisions of the Maravar caste—widows are permitted to re-marry, and divorce is countenanced.

ORIGIN OF NAME.

AUTHORITIES differ as to the origin of the term Maravar. The people themselves cherish the tradition that their ancestors rendered such good service to Rama in his war against Ceylon that, when bidding good-bye to them, he exclaimed in Tamil, "Maraven!" I will never forget! Since then they explain they have been called Maravars. It is far more probable that the name was derived from *marum*, (bravery,) for they were ever distinguished as being a brave and warlike race.

PRIVILEGES.

WHEN the confederacy of Hindu kings, headed by the Royar of Vizianagare, made their desperate and successful effort to drive the Muhammadans from South India, the Sethupathy rendered such good service in the common cause that he was rewarded with the districts of Manaar, Covil, Tiruvalar and Devakottai. He was further allowed the privilege of raising the garuda and monkey banners.

A time came in the long history of the Sethupathis when their once brilliant fortunes suffered a serious eclipse. A period of obscurity followed during which the country was under the directorship of seven rulers, one of whom was regarded as the chief. The land became infested with robbers to the imminent peril of pilgrims to Rameswaram, who cried aloud for the restoration of the Sethupathy to safeguard the causeway, and protect their lives. Early in the 17th century their prayer was granted by Tirumula Naick, Governor of Madura, who nominated Sadaika Deva to the time-honoured post. This prince ruled wisely and well for seventeen years. He paid an annual tribute to Tirumula Naik and, dying in 1621, was succeeded by the eldest of his four sons, Kuthan Regunada Sethupathy.

PEARL FISHERY.

WHEN the first Lord of the Causeway was appointed by Rama, the Pandyan king is held to have expressed approval of the measure by presenting the newly-created Sethupathy with all the jungly tracts adjoining the sea coast. Some centuries later another Pandyan king bestowed the pearl fishery, in the Gulf of Manaar, on Samara Kolakhala Regunada Sethupathy in recognition of services rendered him by the Ramnad ruler in a boundary dispute with the Cholas.

In 1694 Kilavan Sethupathy, entered into an agreement with the Dutch East India Company by which the Company was allowed certain pearl-fishing rights. A

second treaty was concluded in 1767 making over the Pamban Channel to the Dutch, with the proviso that the Sethupathy and his subjects should always be allowed free passage across. The Dutch Company, however, was empowered to grant or refuse access to foreign vessels as they deemed fit. In spite of this contract the Sethupathy seems to have retained possession of Pamban Channel, and to have exacted tribute money from the Dutch, as well as customs' duty on all imports and exports.

BRITISH ASCENDANCY.

IN 1770 the Raja of Tanjore invaded Ramnad on the pretext of regaining certain territories which he alleged had been wrongfully taken from his predecessors by the Sethupathy. He was completely routed, but Mahomed Ali, Nawab of the Karnatic, seized the opportunity to pay off old scores. Accordingly he persuaded the British Government of Madras that Tanjore, as a tributatory, had been guilty of a serious offence in attacking the Nawab's feudatory of Ramnad. Assisted by the British, Mahomed Ali attacked Tanjore, after which he urged the necessity of similar action against Ramnad and Shivagangah, on the grounds that they had withheld assistance in the expedition against Tanjore.

In 1773 General Joseph Smith defeated the army of the Sethupathy and subdued the territory on behalf of the Nawab. This accomplished the infant Lord of the

Causeway, together with his mother and sister, were removed to Trichinopoly. For the next eight years the country was directly governed by the Nawab through his personal representative. The people, however, were not satisfied, and threatened to rise *en masse* unless their Sethupathy were restored to them. Finding a revolution imminent the Nawab deemed it expedient to accede to their wishes and the Sethupathy was duly re-instated. In 1779 the entire Ramnad district was ceded to the British by Mohamed Ali, who welcomed a favourable opportunity of ridding himself of his turbulent feudatories.

THE RAMAYANA.

VALMIKI is the name of the poet credited with having written the Ramayana. Authorities differ widely as to even the approximate date of the great Indian epic. Some place it as early as 2000 B. C. and others as late as 5000 B.C. One eminent orientalist advances the theory that, in its present form, it is a Brahminised version of the original, and must be set down as the combined effort of several authors. However learned opinions may differ on the subject, there is no disputing the fact that the Ramayana has charmed countless generations, and continues to do so to the present day. The Brahmin, ready to read or recite some of its thousand and one marvels, can always count on an eager and reverent audience, for whom "age cannot wither or custom stale its infinite variety."

THE AUTHOR.

NOTHING in the wondrous tale is stranger than the manner in which it came to be written. Valmiki was a hermit and dwelt apart in the jungle. Much of his time was passed in *yogi* practices. Plunged in deepest meditation he ever sought to get in tune with the infinite. One day, as he was seated cross-legged outside his hut, Narada, the messenger of the great god Siva, appeared before him. The divine visitant questioned the ascetic concerning his meditations. Learning from the good hermit that he was perpetually pondering some project whereby man might be made better and nobler, Narada desired to know the conclusion to which Valmiki's long hours of solitary thought had led him. Full of his theme, the recluse replied that man required to have held up before his mental vision the reflection of a man mortal as himself, clothed in just such a frail body of flesh and subject to all the temptations by which poor humanity is tried, who yet emerged triumphant from the ordeal, a model for all to emulate.

Touched by the hermit's love for his fellows, Narada proceeded to tell him of just such a hero as he had described. Valmiki was overjoyed at the recital. The divine messenger concluded by desiring him to find a bard who should sing the story in verses so enchanting that all mankind would listen to the deeds of Rama, the son of Dasaratha, and mould their natures accordingly.

THE TWO HERONS.

DEEPLY pondering the life and adventures of Rama, the sage bent his steps towards a lotus-covered lake. There, in the limpid waters, Valmiki proceeded to perform those ablutions held essential by all Brahmins. While thus engaged his attention was attracted by two herons of marvellous plumage. Even as he watched them admiringly an arrow whizzed through the air and pierced one of the beautiful birds. Instantly its widowed mate broke into pathetic cries, fluttering round the fallen heron with the confused aimlessness of acute distress. Stirred by the unexpected show of grief and unprovoked slaughter, Valmiki gave unconscious utterance to the sympathy he felt. The words came slowly at first, then swiftly and in ever more melodious verse.

After he returned home the rhyme pity had inspired haunted Valmiki and he kept repeating it over in spite of himself. Before long the great god Siva came to pay him a visit. When the sage strove to utter appropriate terms of greeting the words refused to rise to his lips. In their place he found himself repeating the poem on the death of the heron. Noting the good man's confusion, Siva smiled, and assured him that the divine gift of poesy had been bestowed upon him as a reward for his blameless life and the austerities he had practised. The God then directed him to compose the Ramayana, promising him that the poem should endure as long as the sea and the mountains remained on earth.

Obedient to the divine command, Valmiki seated himself, facing the east, on a cushion of kus and grass. There, plunged in a *Yogi* trance, all the actors and scenes, so vividly portrayed in the Ramayana, passed before him as, one by one, he wove them into the vast fabric of the poem.

THE STORY.

ONCE upon a time, in the far-off Tretayuga, of Silver Age, there dwelt a king named Dasaratha. The beautiful country over which he ruled was called Kosala, and its capital was Ayodha. This great and splendid city contained palaces, bright with burnished gold, lakes and gardens of unparalleled loveliness. Everyone in it was prosperous and happy, and existence was one long dream of delight. The only person in the realm who had cause for discontent was the king himself. Dasaratha was childless. While bestowing many great and good things upon him the gods had withheld that best and most blessèd of all—a son. Without a son to personally superintend his funeral obsequies, the king knew that his spirit would be condemned to suffer ages of unrest in the next world.

Having exhausted every other means of propitiating the deities, Dasaratha at last determined to perform the Aswamedha, or great Horse Sacrifice. Efficacious though this tremendous ceremony is when properly conducted, the slightest error in the complicated and elaborate proceedings has the reverse effect, and entails the most dreadful consequences on the luckless monarch who

has dared offend the powers by a wrongly performed Aswamedha.

Dasaratha was a man of experience, having reigned for sixty thousand years. Consequently he neglected no precaution which might tend towards the success of the contemplated sacrifice. Brahmins were loaded with gifts and commanded to attend in vast numbers. Kings were invited from the most distant realms. In short, never had preparations been made on so grandiose a scale

THE GODS.

WHILE Dasaratha was making ready for the sacrifice the remainder of the earth was being ravaged by a race of Rakshasas, or demons, ruled over by Ravana, the ten-headed King of Lanka (Ceylon). This monster had practised long and austere penances by virtue of which the supreme god Brahma had granted him the boon that neither deity nor fiend should be able to deprive him of life. Ravana had omitted to mention mere man when making his request for immunity, deeming him a being beneath contempt. Emboldened by the promise extracted from Brahma, the excesses practised by Ravana and his followers knew no bounds. No life was safe from them. Desirous of rescuing humanity from destruction, the gods at last assembled in solemn conclave and begged Vishnu to assume mortal shape, and save the world by slaying Ravana. To this the deity consented.

THE ASWAMEDHA.

WHEN all was ready, even down to the most minute detail, Dasaratha performed the great Horse Sacrifice. As the smoke rose from the altar, a vast form, clad in scarlet robes and wearing celestial jewels, appeared amid the flames. The brilliant apparition held aloft a glittering chalice of purest gold. This he handed to the King, commanding him to divide its contents among his three wives in order that he might be blessed with four sons.

In due course the promised four princes were born, and received the names of Rama, Lakshmana, Bharata and Satrugnah. Now Queen Kaucalya was Dasaratha's principal wife and had been the first to receive the celestial liquid. She had taken a longer draught than the other two royal ladies, hence her son Rama possessed a proportionately greater share of the divine nature, and to him the gods allotted the task of slaying Ravana. Unconscious of his great destiny the young prince grew towards manhood. He was the idol of the people in general and of the old king in particular. Naturally endowed with rare qualities of mind, Rama was of exceeding physical strength and unusual good looks. The poet describes him as of "a beautiful blue colour."

VISWAMITRA.

WHEN Rama was sixteen years of age, a famous ascetic named Viswamitra came to Dasaratha's court to request a boon. The favour asked

by the Brahmin was that Rama should be allowed to accompany him to a distant forest and there slay the giantess Tarika. After much natural hesitation Dasaratha was prevailed upon to give his consent.

Accompanied by his brother Lakshmana, the devoted companion of his many wanderings, Rama set out with the sage. All travelled on foot. After many and varied experiences they finally reached the jungle wherein the redoubtable Tarika dwelt. Rama at once challenged her to mortal combat by loudly twanging his bow-string. Being a Rakshasi she had power to change her shape at will, and perform other marvels of a disconcerting kind. By help of illusion she commenced operations by raising suffocating clouds of dust and raining down stones upon the hero. Finding this of no avail she varied her tactics and became invisible. Nevertheless Rama succeeded in slaying her.

The conflict over, Viswamitra rewarded the prince by giving him a certain number of invincible weapons. At the same time he taught Rama the *mantras* or incantations which rendered their use more effectual.

SITA.

IN the course of their wanderings the illustrious trio came to the country of Mitila, ruled over by King Janaka. Now this virtuous monarch had an only child, his beautiful daughter Sita. This peerless princess was of no ordinary lineage, having had for mother Prithivi, the earth goddess. One day, when

Janaka was ploughing the soil in the course of a child-conferring sacrifice, a female form of surpassing loveliness appeared before him. For an instant he clasped the exquisite apparition in his arms, then the vision faded. Returning to his plough he saw a tiny hand forcing its way through a furrow at his feet. Catching hold of the small fingers he drew a pretty little baby girl out from the earth. This was his daughter Sita.

Long before the arrival of Rama, Lakshmana and Viswamitra, suitors had hastened to Mitila to sue for the hand of the beautiful princess. Janaka, however, made it a condition that the successful suitor must be able to draw a certain mighty bow. So far none had been able to accomplish the feat.

Fired by the tales of Sita's loveliness Rama at once went before the King, announced his parentage and begged leave to try his luck with the weapon. Accordingly, the gigantic bow was brought on an eight-wheeled car drawn by five thousand men. Nothing daunted the prince made ready for the test, with the result that he not only bent but broke the bow. At this Sita became his bride.

A ROYAL PROMISE.

SOME time after the return of the happy couple in state to Ayodhya, King Dasaratha made up his mind to abdicate in favour of his beloved son Rama. Being the son of Dasaratha's principal wife, and the idol of his brothers and of the people, there seemed no possible bar to Rama's succession. The king,

however, feared otherwise. He knew the jealous nature of his favourite wife, the slender-waisted Kaikeyi, and dreaded lest she should have cherished ambitious hopes that her son, Prince Bharata, might ascend the throne.

Influenced by this secret misgiving Dasaratha took advantage of Bharata's absence to put his plan into execution. Everything was privately arranged for Rama's accession, and all would have gone well but for a deformed slave girl. This girl was cursed with a passion for intrigue. No sooner did she learn what was going forward than she hurried with the news to Bharata's mother. Kaikeyi loved Rama and listened with pleasure to the honours about to be conferred on him. The slave, however, worked so skilfully on her jealousy as to excite her to a perfect frenzy of rage and grief. Divesting herself of her ornaments, the queen withdrew to a darkened chamber. There she lay prone upon the floor, her hair dishevelled and her face bathed in tears. Finding his favourite wife in this piteous plight Dasaratha naturally desired to know the cause. Kaikeyi had been schooled by the slave-girl in what she had to say. Accordingly she reminded the king, in a voice broken by sobs, that he had once promised to grant her any two boons she might crave. The time had now come for him to keep his word. She accordingly desired that Rama might be banished for fourteen years and that Bharata should become heir to his father's throne.

EXILE.

OVERWHELMED by this request, Dasaratha fainted away. The royal pledge was sacred, however, and had to be respected.

Amid universal mourning Rama bade farewell to his aged father, to the three queens and to the people. Clad in the habits of bark common to anchorites, he, his beloved bride Sita, and his ever faithful brother Lakshmana, bent their sorrowing steps away from Ayodhya.

Grief at their departure put an end to the old king's life, whereupon Bharata returned in haste to attend his father's obsequies. Great was the grief and indignation of that virtuous prince on learning of Rama's exile, and of the part played by his mother in prevailing upon Dasaratha to banish his favourite son for fourteen years. Bharata heaped reproaches upon Kaikeyi for her conduct, and drove the treacherous slave-girl out of the palace. He then vowed he would never mount the throne while the rightful heir was alive.

Accompanied by his youngest brother, by his entire Court, and by all the people, Bharata set out to search for the exiles and bring them back to their kingdom in triumph. The meeting between the brothers was most moving, but Rama refused to return to Ayodhya until the appointed fourteen years named by their father should have expired. At this intelligence Bharata piously removed his brother's gold-embroidered sandals, in order

that he might bear them back to Ayodhya and place them before the vacant throne until such time as Rama should return and claim it.

After this the exiles bent their steps southwards. Weary at last of wandering, they built themselves a hut in the flowery heart of a dense forest haunted by evil Rakshasas. There they dwelt in peace and happiness until, in an unlucky hour, Sita believed that she heard her husband's voice calling for help, and despatched Lakshmana to his assistance. No sooner was she alone than a venerable-looking Brahmin appeared before the doorway. To her intense discomfiture and astonishment he at once broke into loud praise of her beauty. Fearful, however, of incurring his displeasure and being cursed in consequence, Sita invited the ascetic to enter. No sooner was the pretended Brahmin inside than he threw off all disguise, and appeared in his true character as Ravana, the Ten-headed King of Ceylon.

THE FLIGHT.

IN passionate terms the demon pleaded his love. He implored the princess to abandon her humble home in the jungle and accompany him back to Lanka, where she would reign in royal splendour as queen of the Rakshasas. Indignation lent Sita courage. Usually the most timid and meekest of women, she drew herself up to her full height and proudly declined the demon's offer. At this he snatched her up by the hair and feet and bore her away in his wonderful

flying car. As they soared far above the tops of the tallest trees of the forest Sita cried aloud for help to Rama. Her voice reached Jatayus, the vulture king. This ancient bird, although more than sixty thousand years old, at once flew to her rescue, but received a mortal wound from an invincible weapon wielded by Ravana. As he lay dying on the ground he was found by Rama and Lakshmana who, wild with grief at the disappearance of their beloved Sita, had set out to search the forest for some trace of her. The expiring vulture told them how he had done battle for the princess. Rama and Lakshmana only delayed long enough to build his funeral pyre, after which they pursued their quest.

KABANDHA.

THEIR next encounter was with Kabandha, a hideous, headless monster with a gaping mouth in the centre of his frightful body. Him they slew. As he drew his last breath Kabandha informed them that he was, in reality, a prince of surpassing beauty, but that having incurred a Brahmin's curse he was imprisoned in that loathsome form until Rama should slay him. The brothers built a funeral pyre and laid the corpse upon it. From the purifying flames rose an apparition of unspeakable loveliness. The spirit paused ere ascending heavenwards to counsel Rama to seek out Sugriva, the monkey king, and obtain his assistance.

SUGRIVA.

RAMA followed the advice so curiously given He found Sugriva and entered into a compact with that exiled monarch whereby he undertook to assist him to regain possession of the kingdom from which he had been driven by his brother, the mighty ape Babi. In return Sugriva promised to aid Rama in his war against Ravana and the Rakshasas. It was at this juncture that Rama became acquainted with the famous monkey Hanuman, son of the wind god, who was destined to render him such signal service.

LANKA.

IT was Hanuman who learnt from Sampati, brother to Jatayus, the slaughtered vulture king, of Ravana's flight to Ceylon with the captured Sita in his arms. Having obtained this momentous information the Wind God's son took a mighty leap across to the distant island realm ruled over by the ten-headed demon. Once in Lanka, the powerful ape contracted his huge body to the size of a cat. Under cover of night he then proceeded to explore the city and the palace, the wonders of which filled him with admiration heightened by amazement at so regal a display of matchless wealth.

Failing to discover the lost Sita among any of the sleeping beauties of the zenana, Hanuman betook himself to an enchanted Ashoka grove where Rama's wife

sat pale and in tears. Surrounding her was a guard of frightful-looking *rakshasis*, or aged she-demons. Hanuman took up his position on the branch of a leafy tree and waited. Day had not long dawned when a flourish of many trumpets announced the arrival of Ravana, splendidly appareled and accompanied by all his court.

Approaching Sita, the fiend proceeded to plead his cause in respectful but impassioned terms. The princess replied by requesting to be sent back to her husband, whereupon Ravana lost patience and threatened her with death if, at the end of a month, she still declined his proposals. With this threat he withdrew. This surprising clemency on the monster's part arose from secret fear of Brahma. The god, righteously incensed at Ravana's treatment of a celestial nymph, had threatened him with instant annihilation should he ever again force a woman to wed him against her will.

No sooner had Ravana and his suite withdrawn than Hanuman availed himself of the opportunity to inform Sita of his presence. The faithful ape offered to carry her off then and there. Reassured by the information that Rama was proceeding to her rescue, assisted by Lakshmana and the monkey host, Sita replied with gentle dignity that she would await the coming of her lord. She thought it fitting she should owe her deliverance to none but Rama.

HANUMAN'S REVENGE.

INDIGNANT at the treatment Sita was receiving from the Rakshasas, Hanuman proceeded to display his resentment by uprooting the most beautiful among the trees, and doing as much damage as possible. When Ravana heard of the destruction wrought by the formidable ape, he ordered his immediate capture. Noosed and tightly bound with strong cords Hanuman was dragged before the demon king's presence and condemned to death. Nothing daunted he made a speech in which he announced himself to be an envoy from Rama, and demanded the instant release of Sita. As an envoy his life was respected, but, in order that he might not entirely escape punishment, Ravana commanded his tail to be burnt off. The much-prized appendix was consequently bound round with rag steeped in oil and a light set to it. Learning what was going on Sita implored the fire god to take pity on Hanuman and do him no harm. Obedient to her request the flames blazed up brightly, but did not even singe the monkey's hair. He, however, took advantage of his fiery tail to set light to the city of Lanka, with the result that many of its noblest buildings were burnt to the ground. This peerless capital had been planned by Vishvakarma, the architect of the gods, hence the damage wrought by Hanuman was irreparable.

RAMA'S DESPAIR.

SATISFIED that his visit to the Rakshasa stronghold would not soon be forgotten, Hanuman gathered himself together for another

mighty leap, and landed back on the shores of India. Without further loss of time he sought Rama, and informed that prince of all that he had seen and done in Lanka.

After a rapid advance southwards, the great army of apes and bears who had espoused Rama's cause encamped on the beach facing the straits which separated Ceylon from the continent.

At sight of the unbroken expanse of blue ocean, Rama was overwhelmed with despair. It seemed that Sita was for ever lost to him. The sea itself was in league to keep him from her! Distracted by this thought, he drew his wonderful bow and began to shoot arrows into the water depths. While he was thus engaged, the sea god, horror stricken at the havoc worked among the denizens of his realms, rose majestically from the waves which the rain of deadly darts had lashed to tumult. The god explained to Rama that Nature must run her appointed course, hence it was impossible for him to open up a dry passage through the sea whereby the monkey host might march to Ceylon. At the same time he would allow the billows to be crossed by a bridge, and advised the prince to seek the help of Nala, one of the monkey leaders, son to Visvakarma, the architect of the gods. This Rama did, and very soon the vast army of monkeys and bears were moving on towards Lanka.

VIBISHANA.

WHILE the work of constructing a causeway across to Ceylon was in progress, Rama was joined by Vibhishana. This virtuous prince was brother to Ravana, but he was as good and mild as his brother was ferocious and bad. Having vainly entreated the demon-king to restore Sita to her husband, he deserted his brother and sought Rama to whom he offered his services.

Once safely landed in Lanka the monkey forces lost no time in proceeding to the attack. A succession of desperate battles followed. The war ended by Rama piercing Ravana through the heart with an arrow from his invincible bow. At this happy conclusion of hostilities, Rama rewarded Vibhishana by proclaiming him king in his brother's stead.

THE ORDEAL BY FIRE.

VIBISHANA'S first act was to hasten to the grove where Sita was still a close prisoner. He took with him queenly robes and jewels of great value. Thinking to please her lord, Sita arrayed herself in these. Thus brilliantly apparelled she entered the splendid palanquin prepared for her reception. As she was borne along the monkey host pressed round, anxious to catch a glimpse of the lovely lady for whom they had fought so hard.

When the attendants ordered them sharply to stand back, Rama interposed, and commanded the princess to

descend and proceed on foot that all might look on her who would.

To the universal astonishment Rama evinced no emotion at seeing his bride. His face was cold and stern, and he seemed indifferent to her dazzling beauty. This reception was so different to what she had expected that Sita paused, frozen and intimidated. What terrible change had come over her lord ? In pleading accents she begged to learn why his love for her was dead ? He replied in hard, measured tones that her long sojourn in the zenana of the demon-king should be explanation enough.

Hurt and amazed, her voice broken by sobs, the loving wife protested her innocence. She urged that far from having led a luxurious existence in a palace she had been kept a close prisoner in a distant grove. At last, finding tears and explanations alike vain, Sita turned to Lakshmana. She bade him prepare a funeral pyre ; then in sight of the assembled host she boldly entered the flames. As she fell, overpowered by heat and smoke, into the heart of the burning mass, a hoarse cry of grief broke from the throats of all present. Before the echo had died down, a band of celestial beings floated earthwards from the sky. In their midst was Brahma. The all-powerful *deva* at once commanded the fire god to rouse Sita and restore her to consciousness. This done, he loudly proclaimed her innocence and bade Rama take her to him without fear. Thus was Sita's purity in-

contestably established to the great joy of Rama and the valiant warriors who had done battle in her cause.

THE RETURN.

THE return to Ayodhra was made in triumph. The faithful Bharata had prepared a brilliant welcome for the exiles, and there was no cloud to dim the happiness of any. Unfortunately slander has a long memory. Evil tongues whispered at first, then, growing bold, spoke aloud of Sita's sojourn in the island of Lanka. Even her triumphant issue from the ordeal by fire, and the divine word itself, did not protect her good name. Influenced, in spite of himself, Rama felt that his honour was at stake. The sight of Sita's matchless beauty became intolerable to him. The sweet music of her voice irritated his brain. With the scandal-mongers he felt how could the passionately enamoured Ravana have resisted so many charms? Sending for Lakshmana, he ordered his brother to conduct Sita to the forest of Dandaka, near the source of the Godavery, and there abandon her. With his usual fidelity Lakshmana carried out the painful duty entrusted to him.

Left alone in the great, dark jungle, the poor Queen, whose only fault had been that she was too beautiful, was found by the sage Valmiki. He led her to a hermitage where she was lovingly tended by holy women. Shortly afterwards she became the mother of twin sons, Kusa and Lava. The little princes were brought up by

the good Valmiki, who taught them his poem, the Ramayana. Once, when a great festival was in progress at Ayodhra, the sage took the little princes with him, and begged permission for them to recite the epic before the King. Rama was much moved on hearing the verses, and caused enquiries to be made concerning the two boys. As a result he acknowledged them to be his sons. He then desired Sita to come forward again and openly proclaim her virtue. Ever obedient to her lord, the banished Queen once more stepped out in front of all the people. Clad in scarlet robes, time had robbed none of her matchless beauty, but sorrow had broken her spirit. At sight of the expectant throng she bowed low her head. Clasping her hands she strove to speak in a voice choked with tears; "As I have never even thought of any other than Rama, so may Mahdevi, goddess of earth, grant me a hiding place".

At the piteous appeal a dazzling throne rose up suddenly from the ground, borne on the shoulders of four dragons. Bending forward from her glittering dais the earth-goddess raised the prostrate Queen, and seated her beside her, murmuring, as she did so, "Welcome to thee." Then the brilliant company sank back into the regions whence they came.

THE END.

WHEN Rama had long ruled over Ayodhra, Time, in the garb of an ascetic, sought an interview with him. Warning was given

that none must interrupt the King and his visitor on pain of death. Unfortunately a Brahmin became impatient at the long delay, and threatened to curse Rama and all his family if he were further denied admittance. Fearing the dread effect the curse might have on his beloved brother, Lakshmana broke in on the audience whereupon his life became forfeit. In consequence he repaired to the river Saraya, whence he was translated to the abode of the gods.

Rama lost no time in following Lakshmana. He too sought the waters of the Saraya accompanied by Bharata, Satrughna and many of his women and courtiers. As he descended into the river the voice of Brahma was heard speaking from the sky: "Approach Vishnu! Thou has happily arrived with thy god-like brothers. Return to thine own body as Vishnu or enter the eternal ether." With this the whole company was wafted towards the blue vault of Heaven, and none was ever seen on earth again.